

Vaughn D. Spencer, Mayor

City of Reading
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Reading, PA 19601
(610)655-6234

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Matthew Dalbey
Deputy Director
White House Council on Strong Cities, Strong Communities
451 7th Street, SW
Room 8212
Washington, DC 20410

Dear Mr. Dalbey,

Please accept this document as the City of Reading's required Letter of Interest in order to be considered for assistance through the Strong Cities, Strong Communities (SC2) Program.

I Economic Development Plan

The City of Reading, Pennsylvania is a community at a crossroads. Once home to the Reading Railroad conglomerate and a wealth of opportunities for jobs in manufacturing, the City now struggles to retain well-paying employers and other sources of economic development. Scarce resources have forced Reading to enter into the Pennsylvania Distressed Municipalities Program (Act 47) in order to develop a fiscal recovery plan¹. Along with these struggles, shrinking tax revenues and a rising demand for human services has created an unprecedented need for a viable long-term strategy to reinvent our community.

Despite our challenges, Reading has a wealth of assets. They include five colleges and universities, two regional healthcare centers, a multitude of tourism venues and attractions and a rising arts and culture scene. Reading also has the distinction of being known as a high-tech epicenter and was featured in a May 2011 issue of *Wired* magazine as one of seven emerging epicenters of high-tech industry across the nation for its job creation in the realm of electrical equipment, namely batteries². It is partly due to these assets that Reading is poised for economic growth in the near future.

A potential upsurge in economic development is also due to the work of City officials and the input of stakeholders. With the help of citizens and other stakeholders, City officials have been focused on high-impact projects and plans to revitalize Reading's commercial corridor and its surrounding areas – entertainment square and the Ricktown Arts District³. Each of these plans is part of a larger, regional plan called the Penn Corridor⁴ initiative which is aimed at reconnecting County residents with their

¹ <http://www.readingpa.gov/content/act-47-recovery-plan>

² http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/05/ff_jobsclustermapping/

³ <http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&frm=1&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CC8QFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Freadingartworks.com%2Fbeta%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2012%2F04%2FRicktown-Master-Plan-2012.pdf&ei=bhfbUcf5JZP08ATqpYCADQ&usg=AFQjCNH0co4bzHEzxiL5H-XamIviTY866Q>

⁴ <http://www.penncorridor.com/>

urban core. In an effort to revitalize Reading's downtown in order to strengthen Penn Corridor as a whole, the City has applied for Keystone Communities designation from the State of Pennsylvania, which will allow Reading to apply for \$2 million in funding for its Main Street Program⁵. Five committees consisting of business owners, residents, developers, nonprofit executives, and county and city officials continue to work tirelessly at bringing plans to revitalize downtown to fruition while the City simultaneously works on plans to attract and retain businesses downtown and city-wide.

II Community Needs and Potential Impact

A federal Community Solutions Team (CST) could assist the City of Reading in achieving its economic and community development goals in several ways. The top three priority areas in which our community is most in need of assistance and for which we are requesting technical assistance and other forms of expertise are (1) Providing coordination, cutting red tape, and lending expertise; (2) Partnering for economic growth; and (3) Enhancing local capacity.

The City would greatly benefit from technical assistance that would help us utilize federal funds more efficiently and effectively as well as provide us with the planning resources and expertise necessary to focus efforts around our community's needs. One of the ways a CST may be able to assist us in this area is by offering technical assistance in our community's efforts to revitalize neighborhoods and redevelop affordable housing stock. As Reading works to reverse its current trajectory toward increasingly decaying housing stock and a diminished quality of life throughout its neighborhoods, many plans have been developed. Among the plans are those for the development of an arts and culture district, a more vibrant downtown, and safer, cleaner, more attractive residential neighborhoods. Additional expertise and access to best practices will help to ensure that Reading is on the right track for planning to revitalize its neighborhoods using federal funds while leveraging private funds and other resources. In addition to rehabbing housing stock, Reading is in desperate need of solutions for crime reduction and prevention in order to repair its neighborhoods. Increasing our capacity to plan for the use of federal funds and promote partnerships that may help prevent and reduce crime would also have an immeasurable impact on our City.

As is the case with revitalizing Reading's neighborhoods, cultivating economic development has remained a top priority for this administration. However, City officials realize that many partnerships and resources are necessary to ensure Reading's economic growth. If provided with a CST, we would eagerly take advantage of technical assistance and expertise that will allow us to develop critical partnerships that focus on job creation, workforce improvement, and economic development with other public, private, and philanthropic leaders. Specifically, we would welcome assistance in creating and implementing small business development strategies and strengthening women and minority-owned businesses. Reading would also be interested in obtaining assistance in aligning local, cross-sector partners' work and resources around the Mayor's economic and community development priorities.

The third priority that the City of Reading would seek the assistance of a CST to work on is enhancing local capacity. To this end, we would ask that the CST assist us in identifying our existing assets and ensuring that economic development plans build appropriately from areas of strength. We understand that this type of technical assistance may come in the form of facilitating peer learning with communities that have excelled in this area, and we would be greatly appreciative of the opportunity to participate in this manner of peer exchange.

⁵ <http://www.readingpa.gov/content/revitalization-strategy-main-street-designation>

III Alignment with Governmental Partners

One key governmental relationship that affects the local use of federal funds is that between City Council and the Mayor. All uses of federal entitlement funds must be approved by City Council before annual action plans detailing the use of funds are submitted to HUD for approval.

Though we do not rely on their approval for the use of federal funds, each of the quasi-governmental authorities plays a pivotal role in local revitalization efforts. The City partners with the Reading Redevelopment Authority (RRA), Reading Housing Authority (RHA), Reading Parking Authority (RPA), and the Berks Area Transportation Authority (BARTA) in development efforts. Though we currently partner with some more frequently than others, we hope to engage each of the authorities more regularly in order to create and implement economic and community development strategies. Each of the authorities is committed to assisting the City with (1) Cost savings through the sharing of resources and avoiding duplication of services; (2) Funding for economic development projects; and (3) The creation of a joint authority specifically focused on economic development priorities. A CST could help us coordinate these efforts and identify best practices from other communities for optimal collaboration with the authorities.

IV Alignment with Non-Governmental Partners

In 2009, the top eight economic development and workforce entities in Greater Reading formed a work group known as the Ride to Prosperity⁶. The Greater Reading Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Greater Berks Economic Partnership, Greater Berks Development Fund, Berks County Government, City of Reading, Berks County Workforce Investment Board, Berks County Industrial Development Authority, and the Greater Reading Convention and Visitors Bureau came together to explore answers for one question: What should Berks County's economy look like in 10 or 20 years?

In order to begin to work toward viable answers to this question, the entities developed a compact and achievable work plan, known as the Ride to Prosperity, and sought to make tangible and important changes in Greater Reading's competitive economic position. They chose to focus in 5 key areas within 3 to 5 years: Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Workforce/Talent Development, Business Clusters, Sites and Infrastructure and Quality of Place. Three years later, the group continues to session and has checked some big items off the weighty to-do list⁷. As regional partners they have strengthened the framework by collaborating with each other. The City of Reading is committed to continuing to work with our partners to ensure that key initiatives continue to benefit the regional economy.

V Alignment with Existing Federal Initiatives

With the exception of applying for a FY2013 Urban Waters grant through the EPA in order to fund a project at Angelica Creek Park (with no success), our local community has not applied for or secured funding through any of the listed federal initiatives over the past three years. However, the City of Reading does intend to submit an application for the FY2014 round of EDA funding.

⁶ <http://www.greaterreading.com/Ride-to-Prosperity.aspx>

⁷ <http://businessweekly.readingeagle.com/economic-development-coalition-begins-long-journey-to-revive-greater-reading/>

VI Point of Contact

The point of contact for the CST will be Lenin Agudo, Community Development Director. His phone number is (610)655-6211 and his email address is lenin.agudo@readingpa.org. Mr. Agudo is the best choice to coordinate the engagement because our chosen top priorities for assistance involve more effective and efficient use of federal funds and assisting with economic and community development initiatives. As Community Development Director, Lenin is responsible for ensuring that federal funds are used effectively and managed within compliance of HUD regulations. He is also responsible for identifying community and economic development opportunities that align with the Mayor's top priorities and may use federal funds to leverage private and other non-federal funds, and having him as the direct point of contact will ensure engagement with the SC2 is coordinated amongst other departments, authorities, and non-governmental partners.

VII City Leadership Engagement

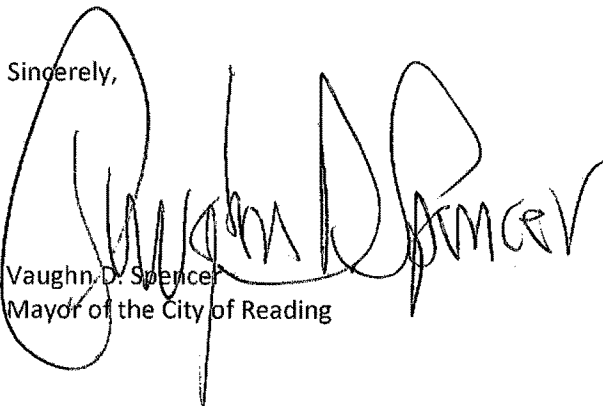
There are no extraordinary circumstances that currently constrain or prevent the involvement of the City of Reading's senior leadership in the Strong Cities, Strong Communities program.

VIII Mayoral Engagement

The Mayor's top priorities remain revitalizing downtown, cultivating a business-friendly City Hall, attracting businesses to undeveloped and unutilized sites in order to spur economic growth, and revitalizing our residential neighborhoods. He envisions the CST playing a vital role in helping to make progress toward these goals and is committed to being engaged in the CST process.

I envision the Community Solutions Team's role as being supportive of the City Administration's identified top priorities by providing additional expertise and technical assistance in regards to federal and other funding sources, facilitating the creation of essential partnerships for economic growth, assisting us with identifying best practices, and creating a mutually beneficial dialogue with other communities in order to help us achieve these goals. Additionally, I am committed to being personally engaged throughout the CST process. The CST will have access to myself, my staff, and any other resources we can obtain to ensure that their work here has the greatest possible impact on our community. –Mayor Vaughn D. Spencer

Sincerely,



Vaughn D. Spencer
Mayor of the City of Reading